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# Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels by Rachel Brownstein

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Nan Hackett

*Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* by Rachel M. Brownstein. The Viking Press, 1982. 322 pages.

RACHEL BROWNSTEIN'S *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* promises a new way to look at Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and other major English novelists. In her introduction, Brownstein points out the peculiar but strong relation between women and novel reading. She read the complete works of Frank Yerby while her brother read history books and biographies of Napoleon. Because little girls are discouraged from becoming generals, girls tend to turn to novels where they can align themselves with heroines, and so seem to be significant. To want to be a heroine, and therefore significant, is not bad; Brownstein points out that it can be the first step in developing a "raised consciousness." But it has its dangers, too. The novels do not always mirror life, and the woman intent upon being a heroine may find herself equally trapped within its strictures, like the woman trapped with children in the kitchen. Brownstein wants to explore those dangers, and the benefits of being a heroine both inside and outside novels.

Brownstein begins with an essay that discusses her own early reading of English classics and how an adolescent, twentieth century Jewish girl from Queens could feel so sisterly and spiritually allied to the heroines of Henry James and George Eliot. For every lonely adolescent female who grew up with parents who read only newspapers, and with classmates who read even less, who spent Saturday afternoons reading Emily Brontë instead of playing softball or hanging around the shopping mall, and who dreamed desperately of at least a cottage on the Cornish coast, if not a rambling vicarage on the moor or a country estate, the opening chapter will resound with familiar realizations and will entertain as well. However, despite the intriguing and autobiographical (perhaps intriguing because it is autobiographical?) opening, the book soon slips into standard literary criticism.

I do not mean to belittle Brownstein's ability as a literary critic. Most of what she proposes is interesting and well-supported. The emphasis is still on character and the implication of sexual roles, not on structure, linguistic

analysis, or other forms of literary criticism that do not focus primarily on character. It is not as though there is a big split between an interesting and innovative introduction and the following discussions which might have been lifted from any issue of *PMLA* or *College English*. Rather, the essays seemed to follow naturally; I found the discussion of Jane Austen particularly intriguing.

Brownstein places her discussion of Jane Austen after a thorough study of *Clarissa* and begins by stressing important changes in the characters' fears and attitudes towards marriage. The appropriate end of the novel or character is still marriage or death, but Jane Austen emphasized different dangers for her female characters. The greatest threat is not male coercion (being raped by a rake or forced into marriage by a tyrannical father) but womanly weakness, exemplified by Maria Bertram's willing elopement. Secondly, the danger facing Austen heroines is not physical or sexual, but that they "will let the right man and the chance for action pass them by. They are worth our notice not because they are fragile and vulnerable females in an interesting position, but because they are more truthful and sensitive and substantive, more able to see and interpret life's complexity, than most of the people around them" (pp. 90-91).

This special ability to see greater complexity is partly inherent in the character and also is what needs to be developed further during the course of the novel (e.g., the continuing education of Elizabeth and Emma so that they do not let the right man get entirely away). Yet this greater truthfulness, sensitivity, and understanding also marks them as different from other women within the novel. This leads to a contradiction found in most nineteenth century novels about women. The heroine declares "I am woman" yet she is also compelled to confess "I am not like other women." Becoming a heroine usually means scorning the everyday preoccupations of most women, and setting yourself aside from silly, frivolous, and, frequently, almost all feminine companionship. Elizabeth Bennet prefers the company of her father to that of her mother, although part of her education is to see her father's failings as well. Anne Elliot must learn to stop following the motherly advice of Lady Russell and to marry as she herself sees fit. Brownstein points out this contradiction not to restate the old warning of "woman beware woman," but to stress the peculiar self-consciousness of heroines that can border on alienation or egotism.

This self-awareness and self-study can also make women more susceptible to rakes because the rakes study their victims in order to seduce them. Women "find it seductive to be objects of study to a man, as they are objects of study to themselves" (p. 116). Brownstein goes from there to discuss further what sort of woman chooses to study herself and to read about other women involved in similar self-examination, as she also leads up to her section on several major Victorian novelists. She slips back into autobiography to preface the essays on *Villette*, *The Egoist*, *Daniel Deronda*, *The Portrait*

of a Lady, and Mrs. Dalloway to explain how a "girl from Queens" could feel her life related to that of characters in nineteenth century English novels. Brownstein admits that these works appeal to "egotists disposed to irony, to thinking about what's special about them is the way they look at things" (p. 140).

Brownstein says nothing more about how the girl from Queens looks at things, but gives a lot more interesting insight and speculation about the aforementioned novels. The individual studies cannot be reduced to single sentence summaries of a particular point. They do not push a single-minded, narrow reading but instead offer a lot of ideas about these works, their characters, and what they say about men and women. This is not to say that the ideas are not well-developed, but simply that the essays are not narrow in scope. Even a reader who who is not interested in Brownstein's study of heroines and sexual roles can find much to consider.

Although I enjoyed reading *Becoming a Heroine*, both for the ideas about English novels it offered and for the autobiographical description of an adolescent female with which I identified, I wished that these two aspects were more closely integrated. The opening and closing essays and a brief one in the middle contained all the autobiographical references. That these three sections also contained astute literary criticism showed that the two may be mixed, but Brownstein declined to experiment further with this mixture of personal and objective criticism in the rest of the book. Still, despite the fact that this book offers primarily "standard, depersonalized, authoritarian" criticism, the autobiographical introduction and Brownstein's sensibility does color the whole work. Brownstein pokes fun at herself and at her college friends for appearing to be self-conscious heroines, but she also treats Elizabeth Bennet, Lucy Snowe, and Isabel Archer like real women we all know. The characters are constrained by the choices the novelists make for them, and Brownstein does not try to speculate beyond those choices and the information revealed about them—there is no speculation about how many children Lady Macbeth had—but we are usually aware that this is a woman commenting on particular women, and how reading about those particular women can influence other women as well.

Brownstein concludes that the classic English novels she discusses are not feminist but rather are reactionary. The insistent survival of the marriage plot and the self-conscious contradiction of presenting the heroine as Woman while not like other women tells us much about the history of heroines, novels, and women. Novelists still could conceive of no conclusion to a girl's life other than marriage or death; that twentieth century American female adolescents have no difficulty identifying with a nineteenth century British heroine faced with such an inevitable conclusion shows how little has changed. In conclusion, Brownstein states that these novels "are wise, and full of useful information about what must be kept in mind if we would try to change. I suppose I am saying that they are in a way exemplary" (p. 296).

Brownstein herself can be seen as exemplary of a new direction of criticism where personal and autobiographical responses to a piece of literature can have their place in standard literary criticism, and where the gender of the reader as well as that of the writer is considered. It is an intriguing way in which the characters, and especially the readers and the critics, can all appear more human, more real, and more interesting.